

BOOK REVIEW

THE FORGOTTEN NATURALIST

In search of Alfred Russel Wallace

John G. Wilson (2000)

Australian Scholarly Publishing, Kew, Victoria

RRP \$34.95

The key to this book is the subtitle; it is the story of the author's travels along some of the pathways trod by one of the great naturalists of all time. Read that way it is a pleasant travelogue with a theme of particular interest to anyone interested in natural history. There are some biographical details of Alfred Wallace and some interesting snippets that arose in the course of the author's travels (such as the origin of the term "antimacassar" which comes from Macassar Oil used by Victorian gentlemen on their hair. The source of that oil was of course Macassar).

This book is not an in depth analysis of the roll played by Wallace in the shaping our understanding of evolution. His tremendous insight based on field observations and a flash of genius, said to have occurred while in his sick bed with malaria, led him to see the role of survival of the fittest in shaping new species. There are occasional hints in the text, even in the title, that Wallace's place in history has not been recognised, however I think this is not the case. As an undergraduate I was certainly introduced to Wallace, and no Australian biologists would fail to recognise the biogeographical significance of Wallace's line. I suspect, although it is not spelled out, that the author might believe that Wallace is forgotten as the co-founder, or even by precedence the founder of the modern understanding of evolution and the role of "survival of the fittest". Wallace himself would and did dispute that, as would any practicing scientist. Each of us may hope to have made a contribution to our field of study, but we know full well that any advance is based on groundwork laid by those before us. The ideas of neither Wallace nor Darwin came "out of the blue" in a flash of genius. Both were mightily influenced by the writings of Malthus and the geology of Lyell. As modern biologists build their work on the shoulders of Darwin, so Darwin and Wallace continued along a path started by others, going right back to Aristotle who was well aware of the roll of the environment in the manifestation of physical characters. The concept that progress occurs in sudden leaps due to a flash of genius is part of the folklore of science but far from an accurate view of the workings of scientists. And it is not good enough to simply have the idea. It needs to be expostulated and supported. Nothing in Wallace's life as set out in this book indicates that he would have had the patience to amass the material on which Darwin built his argument.

None the less, Wallace's article "On the law which has regulated the introduction of new species" published September 1855 in *Annals and Magazine of Natural History* was truly remarkable, setting out clearly that evolution had taken place and outlining an early version of "gradualism". I agree with John Wilson that it was the most important contribution to evolutionary theory before the publication of Darwin's "On the origin of species". It was however not "world shattering" as the world of natural scientists was at that time very small. In those days scientific society meetings, such as of the Royal and

Linnean Societies, were focal points of active discussion of issue of the day as well as a venue for the presentation of “read” papers. It is inconceivable that Darwin’s ideas were not bandied about at such gatherings. Darwin did not keep them secret and had clearly been discussing his developing thoughts with the major scientific figures of the day, especially the geologist Lyell and the botanist Hooker. Therefore the earth shattering aspect of Wallace’s “Law Paper” was not the ideas themselves as much as their appearance from an amateur naturalist in Indonesia. Lyell, and to a lesser extent Hooker, urged Darwin to publish. When he did so the basic ideas were supported by careful exposition and wide observations.

None of this is meant to detract from Alfred Russel Wallace as one of the great naturalists of all time. And much in this book is of particular interest because it shows the tremendous effort and enthusiasm that Wallace put into field work. After returning from the far east he was to put that enthusiasm into a number of causes, many of which seem well in advance of his time. Some of the most interesting material in the book “The Forgotten Naturalist” concerns these activities.

There are some odd statements in the book, such as “Tarsiers are primates not lemurs” (lemurs are primates) and “animals and birds”. However the author does not claim to be a biologist, although some tight editing by a scientific editor would have been useful. But basically this is a travel book and, as I said at the beginning, should be read as such and will provide much enjoyment.

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